
Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān

Bucaille, Maurice

(4,266 words)

Maurice Bucaille (1920-98) was a French physician whose fame relies primarily on his book *La Bible, le Coran et la science*, first published in 1976, which was translated into English two years later. It had a global impact on both Muslim and non-Muslim apologists and scholars and paved the way for scientists to (re-)join the large number of Qurʾān commentators (*mufasssirūn*, sing. *mufasssir*) since it enabled them to interpret the Qurʾān from a so-called scientific perspective. Very soon after its publication, Bucaille's book became an instrument by which Muslims not only tried to prove the inimitability (*iʿjāz*) of the Qurʾān but also to promote "the Qurʾān's immunity from distortion" (e.g., Ḥaqqānī, *Barrasi-yi ārā-yi duktur Bucaille*, 89-96). Some scholars claim that after Bucaille a new trend emerged, called "Bucailleism," which is sometimes used interchangeably with *iʿjāz ʿilmī*, or scientific inimitability. (Bigliardi, *Iʿjāz*, 682-5).

1. Training background, main works and ideas

Bucaille was the head of the surgical section at the University of Paris. He was also the family physician of the Saudi king Faisal (d. 1975). He had spent his pre-university years at a Catholic school, where Christianity was given greater emphasis in the curriculum than it would have been at an ordinary establishment (Bigliardi, *Strange case*). He then left his birthplace of Pont l'Évêque, in Normandy, France, to study medicine at L'École de Médecine in Paris, where he worked as a gastroenterologist during his internship (Bigliardi, *Strange case*). At this time, he also started historical-hieroglyphical studies, and he became acquainted with Islam from his contact with patients, some of whom were Muslims; one of his patients suggested that he read

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the Arabic Qurʾān (Abdul-Aziz, *Maurice*; Abdul-Aziz, *From microcosm*). Subsequently, he attended L'École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes for three years in order to learn Arabic (Bigliardi, *Strange case*). It seems he had some kind of connection with the president of Egypt, Anwar al-Sādāt (d. 1981), because when al-Sādāt's wife fell ill, Bucaille was deemed the most appropriate physician to treat her since he knew Arabic, as well as Egyptian culture (Bigliardi, *Strange case*).

The well-reputed French publisher Seghers published Bucaille's first book, *La Bible, le Coran et la science*, in 1976, which two years later was translated into English and then into various other languages. During his lifetime he published several other books, most of which were initially written in French, though *La Bible* was the most successful of his works.

Bucaille's *La Bible*, in which he criticised biblical information and praised Islamic scripture, very soon became the basis for many research projects for Muslim students and professors of Islamic and Qurʾānic studies. First-rate translators have rendered his words into their own languages, as they believe their translations can uncover many scientific facts stated in the Qurʾān (*kashf al-niqāb ʿan kathīr min al-ḥaqāʾiq*; Bucaille, *al-Tawrāt*, 11). Bucaille's name ranks alongside those of other important scholars of Islam, such as Muḥammad Iqbāl (d. 1938; Smajlovic, 132-44). In *Réflexions sur le Coran* (1989), Bucaille conversed with his Tunisian co-author Mohamed Talbi (d. 2017) about Qurʾānic thinking and ideas about society.

Muslim scholars in the Arabian Peninsula (e.g., the Yemeni ʿAbd al-Majeed al-Zindānī), India (e.g., Maulana Wahiduddin Khan), the Philippines (e.g., Suleiman Qush), and Jordan (e.g., ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṣāliḥ ʿAbdallāh, Nāṣir Aḥmad Khuwālidiḥ, and Muḥammad ʿAbdallāh al-Ṣamadī), among others, were greatly influenced by Bucaille's thesis when they wrote their works on the Qurʾān and nature (Stenberg, 228-33). Beyond the academic arena, Bucaille's works were very much admired by politicians and religious thinkers, particularly in the late 1970s and 1980s. It is said that “the former king of Saudi Arabia, Faisal, appreciated Bucaille's books” (Stenberg, 228-33), although he was killed one year before the publication of Bucaille's chef-d'œuvre.

Bucaille's works are also widely available in mosques and Islamic centers and used “in *daʿwa* efforts in the West” (Furlow, 247). His discussions on the relationship between Islam and science are still popular, particularly across the Muslim world. For example, the famous Egyptian film director Farouq Abdul-Aziz ran an internet website, Bucaillelegacy.com, which seemingly is “supported by the Nasser al-Saʿeed Charitable Foundation of Kuwait.” Abdul-Aziz directed two documentaries, *Maurice and the pharaoh* and *From microcosm to macrocosm*, for which he won the Most Creative Islamic Work Award of 2010 from the Sheikh Fahad al-Ahmad International Award for Charity. Both documentaries were screened by the al-Jazeera Documentary Film Festival in 2010. It seems Bucaille's explicit interest in Islam and the Qurʾān was the main reason behind the documentaries' nomination. The documentaries address the primary reasons why Bucaille began investigating the relationship between religion and science.

As recounted in the documentaries, Bucaille's curiosity about the relationship between religion and science started when he heard about the recent discoveries of cave paintings in the south of Spain when he was only 15 years old. This led him to the belief that science might be able to answer many of his religio-historical questions. Scrutinising the Judaeo-Christian writings, he concluded they were replete with contradictions according to modern scientific knowledge. He gave an example: "The Gospel of Luke mentions that you have between Adam and Jesus seventy-six generations, which is not possible!" He believed thinkers in general, and exegetes in particular, from Christian religious communities assumed that religious teachings were inspired by the authors of the Bible, but elements that are not religious teachings were in fact written according to the ideas, superstitions, and myths of their lifetimes (Abdul-Aziz, *From microcosm*; Abdul-Aziz, *Maurice*).

Comparing the Qur'ān with other Holy Scriptures, Bucaille concluded that the Bible contains some so-called ridiculous statements and that the Qur'ān is the most infallible (Bucaille, *La Bible*, 90). He implied the Bible is full of mistakes, which fall into three categories, "(i) historical inaccuracies or anachronisms; (ii) implausible statements; [and] (iii) blatant contradictions" (Bigliardi, *Strange case*, 248–63). Bucaille referred to historical data, scientific knowledge, and other scriptural statements with the purpose of displaying the obvious mistakes in the Bible. For instance, Genesis 24 indicates that a camel was a means of transportation in the time of Abraham. But Bucaille disregarded that by saying this biblical note is untrue, based on pictorial documents about ancient Egypt (Bigliardi, *Strange case*). Bucaille focused on the biblical text of Genesis and considered the genealogical background of humans to ascertain whether biblical ideas are reliable. He concluded that "the Biblical data concerning the antiquity of man are therefore inaccurate" (Bucaille, *La Bible*, 8).

Bucaille examined the maternal genealogy of Jesus from a Qur'ānic point of view, based on Q 3:33-4. He later mentioned that there were many different errors in the naming of the "ancestors of Jesus" and in his genealogical background in the Bible, errors that are not present in the Qur'ān. As such, Bucaille defended the divine provenance of the Qur'ān by stating that Muhammad was not the writer of the Qur'ān, nor did he copy or paraphrase anything from the Bible and Gospels; otherwise, he would have made the same mistakes in his work.

A coherence between the Qur'ān and modern knowledge was once again imagined by Bucaille when he referred to the history of geography. He compared the authenticity of Noah's Flood and Exodus, both of which are mentioned in biblical and Islamic literature. He concluded that the Qur'ān provides a general version of the Flood, one that "does not give rise to any criticism from a historical point of view"; however, "the incompatibility between the Biblical narration—i.e., the information given on its place in time and geographical extent—and the discoveries that have contributed to modern knowledge is all too clear" (Bucaille, *La Bible*, 143-4).

In comparing Q 11:44—“Then the word went forth: ‘O earth! Swallow up thy water, and O sky! Withhold (thy rain)!’ and the water abated, and the matter was ended. The Ark rested on *Mount Jūdiyy*.”—with Genesis 8:4—“and on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of *Ararat*”—Bucaille analysed the location of the mountain. He said that “this mountain is said to be the highest of the *Ararat* range in Armenia, [and also according to R. Blachère] but nothing proves that the names were not changed by man totally with the two narratives” (Bucaille, *La Bible*, 143).

2. Bucaille’s “scientific translation”

“Scientific translation” was, for Bucaille, a link between his scientific explanations and the meanings of various verses or phrases. Knowledge of modern science is needed to properly understand the meaning of certain terms and phrases.

a. Embryological and physiological perspectives

Regarding Q 96:2, for example, the majority of translators write “created man out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood” (Ali, *The Holy Qur’ān, Translation*). But Bucaille drew the readers’ attention to a *reformed translation*. According to his claim, all translations of Q 96:2 are inaccurate and should have been translated into a perfect form like “who fashioned man from something that clings.” Bucaille suggested that the term *‘alaq* should be more accurately rendered as “something that clings,” and that the common translation, “blood clot,” is incorrect. According to Bucaille, humans never pass through the stage of a “blood clot,” saying: “The original sense of ‘something that clings’ corresponds exactly to the modern, firmly established reality” (Bucaille, *La Bible*, 135). It seems that Sahih International’s translation of Q 96:2, “created man from a clinging substance” (<https://quran.com/96>), was probably inspired by Bucaille’s explanation, although other translators, mainly those who translated the Qur’ān before Bucaille, thought differently. Evidently, Bucaille’s absolute empirical view of scientific elements in the Qur’ān (e.g., Q 96:2) and of the translation of Qur’ānic verses indicates why, for example, he employed the meaning “chewed flesh” for *mudgha*, found in Q 23:14. He stated that the embryo is initially a small mass. By passing through various stages, it is, to the naked eye, fairly similar to chewed flesh (Bucaille, *La Bible*, 136). Also, based on Bucaille’s definition, “intact flesh” is an appropriate meaning for the word *lahm* “because the structure of bones brings up inside this mass in what is called the ‘mesenchyme’ and the bones will be surrounded by muscles for which *lahm* will be used” (Bucaille, *La Bible*, 136).

Bucaille did not adopt the modern interpretation and translation of some scholars who translated, for example, the term darkness (*ẓulumāt*), found in Q 39:6, from an anatomical perspective. For instance, they claimed that three veils of darkness imply the three anatomical layers that protect the infant during gestation. Bucaille remarked, “I am obliged to quote this verse for the sake of completeness; the interpretation given here does not seem to me to be

disputable from an anatomical point of view, but is this what the text of the Qurʾān really means?” (Bucaille, *La Bible*, 136). On this subject, Bucaille believed that many anatomical findings are true and compatible with Qurʾānic texts, although he was not confident as to whether such findings are able to define or explain the verses.

Another example of Bucaille’s disagreement regarding (mis-)translations regards Q 86:6–7. Some French and English translators have rendered these two verses as: “[Man] has been created by a liquid poured out which issues from between the vertebral column and the bones of the breast.” Bucaille claimed that such translations resemble commentaries and are not based on scientific evidence; therefore, they should be translated as “[Man] was fashioned from a liquid poured out. It issued (as a result) of the conjunction of the sexual area of the man and the sexual area of the woman” (Bucaille, *La Bible*, 137). Bucaille believed that wrong translations such as these inevitably lead to incorrect interpretations. This implies that Bucaille had a specific point of view on how scientific facts should inform translations and explanations, but he did not fully use scientific findings to express the meanings of verses, because he was not confident such findings are able to define their central tenet(s).

Bucaille criticised great thinkers and translators because he wanted to affirm the significance of the role that the empirical sciences (e.g., physiology) can play in explaining Qurʾānic verses. Bucaille argued that only he, and no other translator, could produce an acceptable translation of Q 16:66 (Bucaille, *La Bible*, 130). Meanwhile, he also critiqued the translations of Régis Blachère and Muhammad Hamidullah, which caused him to deduce that these translations were incompatible with modern scientific notions. He asserted that “a translator, however expert, is liable to make mistakes in the translation of scientific statements, unless he happens to be a specialist in the discipline in question” (Bucaille, *La Bible*, 130). Bucaille’s translation of this verse is presented as follows: “Verily, in cattle there is a lesson for you. *We give you to drink of what is inside their bodies. Coming from a conjunction between the contents of the intestine and the blood,* milk pure and pleasant for those who drink it” (Bucaille, *La Bible*, 130). The italicised parts of Bucaille’s translation differ significantly from those of Blachère and Hamidullah. Bucaille’s argument is in two parts, (1) a literal investigation and (2) a scientific explanation. Regarding the first, Bucaille himself noticed that “I have translated ‘inside the bodies’ and not as R. Blachère and Professor Hamidullah have done, ‘inside their bellies.’ This is because the word *baṭn* also means ‘middle,’ ‘interior of something’ as well as ‘belly.’ The word here does not have a meaning that is anatomically precise. ‘Inside the bodies’ seems to concur perfectly with the context” (Bucaille, *La Bible*, 130).

To develop the latter, Bucaille applied his physiological knowledge, stating that “physiological notions must be called upon to grasp the meaning of this verse.” Subsequently, he referred to many physiological findings about the mammary glands and concluded, “I consider that the existence in the Qurʾān of the verse referring to these concepts can have no human explanation on account of the period in which they were formulated” (Bucaille, *La Bible*, 131).

3. Bucaille on *tafsīr*

As a Westerner, Bucaille (whose conversion to Islam is generally accepted, even though he himself never declared it) gained exegetical popularity among Muslims by criticising the Bible and praising the Qur'ān. For instance, the Islamic Press Agency published a report entitled "Bucaille is a renowned exegete of the Qur'ān" (1984). Apart from influencing modern exegetical trends, Bucaille discussed the notion of *tafsīr* clearly.

He brought together a number of theoretical issues about the Creation and physiological aspects of people in one of his most important books, *What is the origin of man?* Several points were expressed in this book to help readers comprehend his main ideas about the relationship between the Qur'ān and science. Based on observable facts and logical deduction, Bucaille argued that the act of Creation in the Qur'ān does not contradict the latest scientific information, and its process was fulfilled "over the course of time through the increase in genetic information, which would appear to be the necessary explanation of the transformations undergone by living beings" (Bucaille, *What is the origin of man?* 73, 103). One of his suppositions was that human faith has the capacity to uncover the secrets of natural phenomena (e.g., Creation) once human knowledge in the fields of morphology, biology, and so on increases. Thus, Bucaille's idea was that there is a direct relationship between the level of human understanding of the Holy Scriptures and that of knowledge. He also suggested that earlier exegetes of the Qur'ān were able to explain the outward (*ẓāhir*) façade of Qur'ānic verses, while humans today are also able to understand their interior (*bāṭin*) meaning because of increased scientific knowledge, particularly in morphology and biology. (Bucaille, *What is the origin of man?* 93). In addition, he felt that "if one compares the statements in the Qur'ān with the findings of genetics, however, the true meaning of the verses becomes perfectly clear. Needless to say, the verses were intelligible to man throughout the ages, but until recently, commentators have only been able to uncover their apparent meaning" (Bucaille, *What is the origin of man?* 97). Bucaille's claim is that classical readers of Islam were convinced by the interpretations found in classical Qur'ānic exegetical works because they helped them to perceive God's omnipotence (Bucaille, *What is the origin of man?* 97). Later, Bucaille compared the impact of science on his interpretation with early exegetical works on the Qur'ān. For instance, interpreting Q 76:28 and Q 6:133, Bucaille said these verses are related to the "punishment inflicted by God on sinful communities" from a classical perspective, but in the modern view, it implies the disappearance of certain communities "and their replacement by others" and increased diversity in their morphology (Bucaille, *What is the origin of man?* 85).

4. His critics

Some Muslims, including Amīn al-Khūlī, had earlier disagreed with some Islamic issues which later expanded by Bucaille about the harmony between Islam and science (Jomier and Caspar, 269). For some Christians, works such as those later produced by Bucaille on the Bible, the

Qur'ān, and modern science had also the potential to downgrade every form of Christian teaching. According to the critics of Bucaille, “his discussion of the Bible draws heavily on modern Western anti-supernaturalist treatments of the Bible, based on evolutionary models of the development of religion. These models are at odds not only with biblical teachings but even more so with Qur'anic teachings about revelation” (Wood, 90-5). The significant opposing argument began with the point that a comparative study to distinguish the scientific truths in the Bible and the Qur'ān is (probably) not logical, because the Qur'ān was, based on some of these arguments, revealed in a monocultural context rather than the multicultural context of the Bible. From Bucaille's perspective, many points found in the Bible are inaccurate, and there is no reason to compare biblical scripture with scientific facts (Bucaille, *La Bible*, 7).

Opponents denied Bucaille's anti-biblical claims that the attestation between religious scriptures and modern science should be an initial measuring scale towards identifying the authenticity of a sacred text. For example, William F. Campbell (d. 2014), like Bucaille a physician, who served as a missionary in north Africa, regularly debated with Muslim preachers (e.g., Zakir Naik) about scientific interpretations and the inimitability of the Qur'ān, and questioned the level of scientific accuracy required in this matter. In Campbell's view, the meaning of the term “science” is not restricted to Bucaille's assumption that it is some definitely established standard like physiology, embryology, and so forth; as such, Campbell wished to seek and explain religious truths and to define the term “science” in a traditional manner. Campbell presented a disputation that is still being engaged with by some ordinary Muslims such as Syed Kamran Mirza and Abul Kasem. Mirza has claimed that Bucaille received millions of dollars for his book, which was sold “in [the] Islamic World like a hot cake [*sic*]” (Mirza). Abul Kasem has argued that “Bucaille's writings have become not only a source of inspiration for [Islamists], but it also has [*sic*] become their principal source to confront the secularists who point out the various ambiguities, inconstancies [inconsistencies?] and the unscientific nature that one could find scattered all over [the] Qur'ān” (Kasem). Subsequently, some Muslims critiqued these anti-Bucaill(e)ism works through an Islamic-based website, Answering-christianity.com (Khalid). In fact, Bucaille's book not only played an important role in modern scholarly debates but also provided a context for the general public to pay more attention to the (in)compatibility between science and religious texts.

5. Bucaille's legacy

Bucaille's books received considerable attention and paved the way for other scientists to elaborate on them. Most of his followers are “authors trained in the natural sciences or engineering” (Bigliardi, “Scientific miracle,” 345). For example, after Bucaille, the Western embryologist Keith L. Moore also spent part of his life in Saudi Arabia, and studied the embryological notes found in Islamic texts and, particularly, in the Qur'ān. He presented his own embryological interpretation of Q 22:5, 23:13-14, 32:9, and 39 to the *Journal of the Islamic Medical Association of North America* in 1986, in an article that was later translated into several Islamic

languages. With the help of Muslim scholars, particularly his co-author, al-Zindānī, former professor of religion at King Abdul Aziz University of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and the founder of al-Imān University in Yemen, Moore expanded his embryological thoughts. He referred to Q 39:6 to develop his scientific account and attempt to prove a connection between embryological statements and the accuracy of the verse “He makes you in the wombs of your mothers, in stages, one after another, in three veils of darkness” (Moore, 15-17).

Hamza Andreas Tzortzis, a Greek-British Muslim preacher, and his friend Adnan Rashid, both impressed by Bucaille and Moore, paid particular attention to the embryological reading of the Qur’ān. Tzortzis established various public debates with the aim of clarifying the presence of God in the world and demonstrating the authenticity of Qur’ānic texts for those who disbelieve about such matters. For instance, in “Embryology in the Qur’ān,” published by the iERA, a “UK-based charity dedicated to continuing the Prophetic Mission,” he attempted to respond to academic and non-academic contentions on the subject, of which the most notable is “the Prophet Muhammad plagiarizes ancient Greek embryology” (Tzortzis, 2012).

Zakir Naik, a famous Indian physician and preacher, also relied on Moore’s embryological discoveries and said: “Noting that the information contained in the Qur’ān and ḥadīth is in full agreement with the latest discoveries in the field of embryology, Prof. Moore said ‘if I was asked these questions thirty years ago, I would not have been able to answer half of them for lack of scientific information’” (Naik, 47-8).

After Bucaille and Moore, the number of Western scientists who devoted their time to learning about the scientific elements of Qur’ānic verses increased. They presented their articles in Riyadh in 1983, Cairo in 1985/9, Islamabad in 1987, and Dakar in 1991. Later on, al-Zindānī, who was also the secretary general of the Islamic Academy for Scientific Research, collected several questions dealing with scientific discoveries. His questions were systematically asked of prominent Western and Asian scientists. Al-Zindānī and his colleagues widely distributed the videos and writings of scientists (e.g., E. Marshall Johnson, Gerald C. Goeringer, Joe L. Simpson, Keith L. Moore, Mustafa A. Ahmed, and T. V. N. Persaud) in order to prove that not only the Qur’ān but also prophetic traditions foretold the result of modern physiological, embryological, and geographical research (al-Zindānī et al.). Yet, it is unclear how many of these figures confirm what is attributed to them on different websites and publications.

Bucaille and Moore, thanks to al-Zindānī, familiarised people with the novel doctrine of scientific inimitability and explored other qualities that they found in the Qur’ān that they believed enabled them to foretell scientific findings. In this regard, the notion and the term *ijāz ‘ilmī* was officially added to the Islamic literature in the late 1970s, and it became a systematic part of the Qur’ānic studies syllabus in Muslim academic contexts. It should also be noted that archives suggest that it was more or less discussed by some Iranian scholars a few years earlier than Bucaille (Shīrāzī, 1353/1974).

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